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Worship Library

Title: Lutheran Worship and Emotions

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Category: Teaching and Practice

Emotions, obviously, are a part of us. The emotional self, along with the physical, intellectual and social, makeup what we are. The Scriptures speak of us as body and soul or body and spirit. All these are parts of what makes us the persons we are; all are therefore gifts of God's creation. But all are also under the curse of sin. They are all therefore flawed. When we use our minds, this can serve as a blessing; but sometimes that same intellect can be a will unto itself. Thus when we learn of God's redemption for us, we are thankful that this salvation is not only for our spiritual being, but for our whole being. Thus, for instance, we confess the resurrection of the body.

One occasion, early in his ministry, Dr. Billy Graham was accused of exciting the emotions in his crusades. "The emotions are certainly involved," he replied, "for I speak to people about God's love, and love is an emotional thing!" So when we hear the word of God's gospel in the divine service, we too respond with the emotion of love for him who so loved us. We are grateful for opportunities to use our intellect, our bodies, our whole being in his service. When we come to God's worship, we are there in our whole being. We respond to God's message intellectually and emotionally.

Is Emotion Proper?

But is there an improper way to use our emotions or to give emphasis to our feelings in God's worship? That may be the wrong question, for we don't exactly "use" our emotions, do we? Can we be too emotional, then? Again, that's not the real question. But if we ask whether there is a way in which we expect or desire certain feelings in the divine service, perhaps we are getting closer to a proper concern.

Imagine a scene in which three confirmands have received the Lord's Supper for the first time. It is after the service, and the one girl says to her friends: "Did you feel any different?" One of the friends responds, "I was nervous." "But," persists the first one, "did you feel anything different?" The third girl answers, "the wine burned on the way down!"

The friends laugh. "Well, I kind of thought I would feel something, I don't know, just different, somehow."

Feelings in Worship

We don't say the girl was wrong. Her expectation was quite understandable. But what might be a problem here is that her expectation was misplaced. She was looking for the wrong thing. The important thing is what God has done, has given. When she focused on her feelings, she may have been, and even likely would always be disappointed. Feelings, as we know, can be very unpredictable. Emotions depend on so many different things.

What Is Certain?

But the one thing certain here, the one thing she can always find, no matter how she feels or thinks, is that God is here with his gifts. That's God's promise, a promise given substance in the flesh and blood of Christ here for her. Her Lord is there for her not because of her mood, her understanding, not even her faith; Christ is there because of his will and word. She can come to the Supper feeling happy or sad, bright or blue, but that doesn't matter. God and his gift will be the same. She is assured that she is forgiven, no matter how she feels.

The Danger

One of the greatest dangers of an emphasis on emotions or feelings is that it can imply that the way we feel affects our acceptance with God. That was one of the most spiritually debilitating features of Pietism. It actually caused people to believe that the sign of God's acceptance was whether or not they felt accepted. When the level of our emotional uplift becomes the criterion of worship's effectiveness, then we become prisoners of a very uncertain power.

What Makes It So?

When I come out of church on a Sunday morning and don't feel any different, does this indicate a failure in the service-or even in me? Does the fact that I am not "uplifted" by the sermon or hymns indicate that they were not up-beat enough? We acknowledge that a sermon or other parts of the divine service might be ill prepared to serve God's holy purpose; our own condition may even contribute to that. But is the blessing of God's action finally dependent on the pastor or myself? No, ultimately the blessing is God's even through weak vessels, by the power of his Holy Spirit. His promise is there through Word and Sacrament, regardless of the pastor's effectiveness or my mood. The divine service is intended to point us away from ourselves to God.

In fact, that is one of the important things about the divine service: it is meant to point us away from ourselves and point us to God, to Christ and his cross. That is important, and it is a fact we need to be reminded of often. As one man observed, "we place ourselves at the center of our projects." To focus on ourselves, for instance on our feelings, can threaten worship. We know that an improper use of our reason can usurp God's will; but so can an improper emphasis on our feelings. When, for instance, we seek to be "moved" by worship, we focus on ourselves rather than on God. But when we begin with the stance of recipients of God's gifts in Word and Sacraments, God is the one who decides the nature of the worship, including its mood.

God Declares It So

When God comes to us in his service, he speaks, he pours water, he feeds. When his law says that we are guilty, we are guilty whether we feel guilty or not.

And when God then declares us righteous, forgives our sins, gives us his promised blessing, we are blessed whether or not we feel good or different. God even calls us saints when we hardly feel like saints (or act like saints!). But when God declares it to be, so it is. Our emotions cannot hide or block the truth of God's word. We can hinder God's word, to be sure, but we cannot change the truth or sureness of his law and promise.

So it's not a question of whether or not our emotions are involved; it's not a matter of whether we "use" our emotions or not. Basically we don't approach God's service thinking about our emotions or our intellect or our bodies. We approach God's service, hearing his invitation and all his words, and receiving his gifts. The emotions and the intellect are involved, but in a way that we don't think about them; we

come to the divine service confident and thankful that God is thinking about our feelings and about everything else pertaining to the well-being of our lives. Then, when we are thankful for God's gracious concern and promised gifts, then the emotions are likely to be very much present in our worship, in our joyful response.

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